The Peranakan Baba Nyonya

The Peranakan were mainly Chinese, predominantly Hokkiens from the Fujian Province of southern China, who settled in Indonesia, Thailand, Melaka, Penang and Singapore a few centuries ago, integrating into South East Asian life and adopting many aspects of the local culture.



This resulted in a truly unique fusion of language, dress and lifestyle which exists to this day. The men were called *babas* and the women *nyonyas*; as recipes were handed down through womenfolk, this type of food is known as 'nyonya' cooking. It is a measure of how important food was to them when the kitchen was referred to as *perut rumah,* the stomach of the house.

Many dishes were labour-intensive; it was all hands to the deck each and every day. Girls were commandeered to help in the kitchen under the watchful eye of the matriarch almost as soon as they could walk, starting with simple chores, graduating to the actual preparation of the various *rempahs* (chilli pastes) which can make or break a dish before finally being allowed to do the cooking herself, under strict supervision of course. In olden days, prospective in-laws would closely inspect, amongst other things, a girl's culinary skills, for this was surely an indication of how well she had been brought up.



Each region had its own specialities which incorporated locally-available ingredients; as Penang is so close to the northern border, there are distinct Thai influences. Much use is made of strong flavours like chillies, coconut, tamarind, locally-grown herbs and spices, and the "aromatic" *belacan*. Many are eaten with plain white rice to do justice to the delicious flavours.

Where to get Nyonya Food

Nyonya food is usually home-cooked, although you'll find local variations all over Penang and the northern states: in "Economy Rice" stalls, "Chu Char" (literally cook/fry) places, *kopi tiams* (coffee shops) and markets. A few of the more specialised dishes may only be available in *nyonya* restaurants, which tend to be family run.

Nyonya Restaurants

Hot Wok Restaurant
124 E&F Jalan Burmah, George Town, 10050 Penang
Tel: 604-227 3368

Mama's Nyonya Cuisine
31-D Lorong Abu Siti Lane, George Town, 10400 Penang
Tel: 604-229 1318

Nyonya Baba Cuisine
44 Jalan Nagore, George Town, 10500 Penang
Tel: 604-227 8035

Nyonya Breeze
50 Lorong Abu Siti, 10400 George Town, 10400 Penang
Tel: 604-227 9646

Perut Rumah
17 Jalan Kelawei, George Town, 10250 Penang
Tel: 604-227 9917

Sri Batik Nyonya Café
102-E-2 New World Park, Jalan Burmah, George Town, 10050 Penang
Tel: 604-2288 919

Note: *This booklet is merely intended as an introduction to Penang Peranakan nyonya food, and not a definitive authority on it. If you wish to find out more about it and other aspects of this fascinating culture, check out www.peranakannetworks.com or visit the Pinang Peranakan Mansion www.pinangperanakanmansion.com.my.*

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PENANG Peranakan Cuisine









Part of Penang's proud heritage is its Peranakan (nyonya) culture.
Their cooking, much influenced by local ingredients, was the original fusion food.

This is an introduction to Penang's popular nyonya cuisine.

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Nyonya Asam Laksa

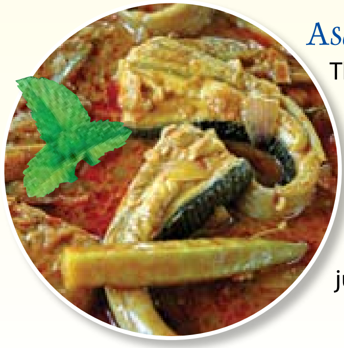
Simply called *laksa* here, spicy, sour fish soup redolent with local spices is ladled over thick white rice noodles and served with a garnish of julienned fresh vegetables and a spoonful of black gooey *hey ko* (prawn paste).



Tau Eu Bak

There are several versions of this meat (chicken or pork) braised in soya sauce. Often *tau kua* (firm bean curd), Chinese mushrooms and hard-boiled eggs are added. *Tu Ka Chor* (trotters) is a sweet variation using black vinegar.





Asam Tumis

This is a popular fish *gulai* (curry) made with fried (tumis) *rempah* (paste) of lemon grass, *belacan* and chilli, to which a light solution of tamarind juice is added.



A few commonly-used ingredients







- Belacan
- Asam (Tamarind)
- Fresh herbs:
  - Daun Kaduk
  - Bungah Kantan
  - Daun Kesum
  - Lengkuas
  - Daun Pandan



Kari Kapitan

A popular curry usually made with chicken, it's perfect for those who don't like their food too spicy.



Perut Ikan

Literally translated to "Fish Stomach" because it is traditionally made with pickled fish innards, *Perut Ikan* is a true conglomeration of local vegetables and herbs. The pickles add a fishy taste which goes beautifully with the myriad flavours that the herbs impart.



Otak Otak



Like the previous dish, the name might be slightly off-putting as it means "brains" but now the main ingredients are prawns and/or fish meat, which is steamed with a fairly stiff spicy *rempah*, *santan* and egg mixture. The curried custard is delicious cold or hot.

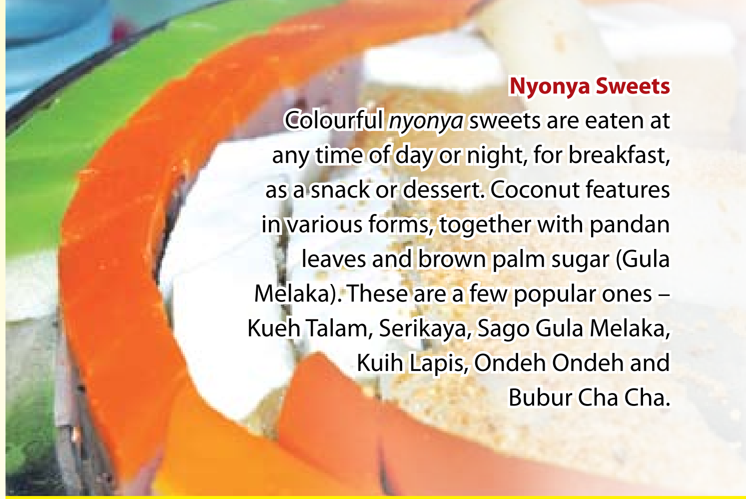
Jiu Hoo Char

A delicacy of julienned *bangkuang* (yam bean) fried with dried octopus strips, this is a local salad eaten at festive times. A tablespoon of the mixture is wrapped in a lettuce leaf and topped with a dollop of *sambal belacan*.

Nasi Ulam

Cooked rice tossed in at least ten different local herbs and spices, given an extra savoury twist with pounded dried shrimp.

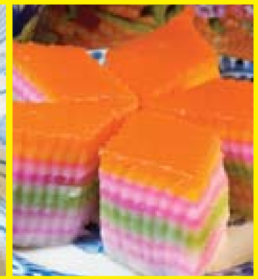




Nyonya Sweets

Colourful *nyonya* sweets are eaten at any time of day or night, for breakfast, as a snack or dessert. Coconut features in various forms, together with pandan leaves and brown palm sugar (Gula Melaka). These are a few popular ones – Kueh Talam, Serikaya, Sago Gula Melaka, Kuih Lapis, Ondeh Ondeh and Bubur Cha Cha.







Condiments

Nyonyas are very fond of their condiments, and you will typically find at least one or two small side dishes *a table*:



Sambal Belacan

A chilli paste using grilled *belacan* with fresh chillies.

Acar Awak

A spicy relish of crunchy pickled vegetables, it is eaten hot or cold, as an appetiser, or as a condiment.

